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RESEARCH IN COHESIVE AND DISRUPTIVE TENDENCIES
IN COALITION-TYPE GROUPS

Technical Report Number 5

THE CONCEPT OF EFFECTIVE GROUP OPINION: ESTIMATES OF GROUP OPINION
AS RELATED TO THE OPINIONS OF HIGH INFLUENCE MEMBERS¹

Ben Willerman

University of Minnesota

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When a measure of a group's opinion on a given topic is desired, the mean or some index of central tendency of the scores of all the members of the group is commonly used to represent the standing of the group on that particular issue. This method of representing the group's opinion, however, is probably unsatisfactory for some purposes. What the group does may depend upon a simple majority or plurality, for example, rather than the average opinion of all the members. In some circumstances the opinions of the leaders of the group may be more important in determining its actions than the opinions of the rank-and-file members. It seems highly desirable, therefore, to introduce a concept resembling "effective" group opinion, to develop corresponding measures of it, and to test its value.

This study lends, in a small way, indirect support to the above point, but the research is more directly concerned with the hypothesis that the perception or estimate by a particular individual of his group's opinion will be more highly related to the opinions of a specified sub-sample than to the opinions of the entire population of the group. The relevance of this hypothesis to the concept of "effective" group opinion lies in the assumption that the estimation of a given group's opinion will determine how a member of that group will behave and also may determine the behavior of outsiders with respect to that group.

Specifically, the hypothesis under consideration is that the judgment of a group's opinion will be more highly related to the opinions of the more influential members of the group than to the opinions of the entire group when the group's opinion is represented by a mean rating. Since the entire group does not usually voice its opinion on all issues, the perception of group opinion on some issues will be based primarily on those opinions which are expressed and which seem dominant within the group. It is safe to say that the more influential members of the group will be more likely than the less influential to express their opinions on group-relevant issues and thus, as it were, to speak for the group.

1. The research was carried out under contract with the Office of Naval Research as one project under Contract N8 onr-66216. It is also a part of a program of research on the social psychology of student groups conducted by the Office of the Dean of Students, University of Minnesota.

METHOD

As part of a larger study of the attitudes of a number of fraternities toward the Inter-Fraternity Council (IFC)(2), the fraternities' representatives to the IFC were interviewed. Among the questions asked was, "How important does your chapter consider the office of IFC representative?" The responses to this question were coded in two categories, "important" and "not important." Coding agreement on the part of two independent coders was very high; there was only one disagreement. Although 31 of the 32 representatives were interviewed, only 25 could be used in this study for reasons to be given shortly.

A few months later 26 of the 32 fraternities were given questionnaires. Among the items was the question, "How important to your chapter do you consider the job of IFC representative?" Five alternatives were provided, "1. very important" to "5. not important." Of the 26 fraternities and 31 representatives there was an overlap of 25 which is therefore the N of this study. The fraternities ranged in membership from 13 to 70 members with a median of 30. The median per cent return was 86; the inter-quartile range from 82 to 98; the range from 47 to 100.

The representative's answers may be regarded as his estimate of the importance to his group of the office of IFC representative and the members' answers may be regarded as the weight they assign to the office.

To separate the answers of the more influential members of the group from the less influential, the questionnaire included the question, "On fraternity matters, how much weight do your opinions have compared to the other members of your chapter?" The alternatives were "1. much more weight than most of them" to "5. much less weight than most of them." The validity of this question was checked by comparing the responses of officers with those of non-officers.

Within each fraternity, means were computed of the ratings of importance of the office of representative for the total group, for the more influential members and for the less influential members, separately.

RESULTS

As an indication of the validity of the self-ratings of influence, Table 1 shows that the question is probably good enough for our purposes. A very high relationship should not be expected because some offices are not necessarily filled with influential members and some non-officers may have formerly been officers, still retaining their influence. Moreover, some influential members probably never occupy an office.

Table 1

Officership and Self-ratings of
Relative Influence on Fraternity Matters

Self-ratings Of influence	Elected Officers		Appointed Officers		Non- Officers	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
More than most	85	48	46	30	74	20
Same or less than most	92	52	106	70	289	80
	177	100	152	100	363	100

Table 2 summarizes the data relevant to the hypothesis. The mean, 2.69, of the ten fraternities which are judged by their representatives as regarding his office as unimportant is lower in rated importance than the mean, 2.41, of the 15 fraternities judged as giving more weight to that office. Although the difference of .28 is in the proper direction, the t test falls short of significance.

Table 2

Means and Differences Between Means of
Fraternity Ratings of Importance of Representative's
Office*

Representative's Per- ception of group's opinion	Mean Ratings of Importance By:			
	Total Group**	More Influen- tial members	Less Influen- tial members	More Influen- tial minus less influential
Unimportant (N=10)	2.69	2.87	2.63	.24***
Important (N=15)	2.41	2.39	2.40	-.01
Unimportant minus Import.	.28	.48	.23	
<u>t</u> of difference	1.65	2.55	1.20	
P two tailed (df=23)	<.20> .10	<.02	<.30> .20	

*The smaller the numerical value, the greater the importance attributed to the representative's office.

**Small discrepancies between the means for total groups and sub-groups is due to errors in rounding and to variable N's of the more or less influential members.

***t=1.85, df=9, p=.10

When only the responses of the self-classified more influential members are used, the difference between the means of the two sets of fraternities increases to .48 and the t test is significant. Using the responses of only the self-classified less influential members decreases the difference and the t test is less significant than even for the means based on the entire membership.

Important to note is that the higher relationship results entirely from the differences within those groups judged to regard the office as unimportant. A t test of the difference between the means of the high and low influence members of these 10 groups is significant at the 10 per cent level. The hypothesis, then, apparently holds only under special conditions additionally qualified by the fact that the difference does not meet the conventional level of statistical significance.

DISCUSSION

Why there is no difference in the mean ratings of the high and low influence groups while there is a difference in the "representative unimportant" groups is difficult to say. Two hypotheses were entertained to account for this finding. At first it seemed that the theory relating the relevance or importance of an issue to the amount of pressure toward uniformity of opinion within the group would be an appropriate one (1). This theory states that pressures toward uniformity of opinion on a given issue within a group will be stronger the more the issue is important to the group. Assuming that the importance of the office is equivalent to the variable of the importance of an issue, we should therefore expect that the variability of opinion on the questionnaire item should be smaller within the "representative important" groups than in the "representative unimportant" groups. There is a question, however, as to the applicability of this hypothesis because the opinion measured here seems to confound the substance of the opinion and the importance of the issue. Rigorously speaking, the way to measure the importance of this particular issue would be to ascertain how important it was that there be agreement upon the status hierarchy of offices within the fraternity.

Disregarding the question of the group's concern with the importance that should be attached to the office of IFC representative, another hypothesis may be advanced which considers only the importance of the office, or generally speaking, of the subject. This hypothesis says that the frequency of communication about a subject will directly vary with the importance of that subject to the group. Thus, in this instance, if the office of IFC representative is important the influential and non-influential members will be apprised of this fact in some way and will therefore tend to give about the same ratings. If the office is unimportant this fact will not get communicated throughout the organization. Only the executives of the group will be in a position to evaluate accurately its lack of importance. Possibly, the officers may even hide the fact that the office is unimportant from the rank-and-file for morale purposes. In addition, there may be a tendency for non-officers to rate all offices as relatively important. These speculations do seem to account for the data but cannot be checked in this study.

Turning to the original hypothesis that estimations of group opinion will be more highly related to the opinions of the influential members than to the opinions of the group as a whole, two explanations may be suggested.

The hypothesis was at first based upon the supposition that in making such judgments the opinions which are expressed will be taken to represent the group's. Influential members will more frequently express their opinions than non-influential members and their opinions will thus determine the judgments others make of the group's opinion.

In this particular study another hypothesis must also be entertained. Because the judges of group opinion in this study are probably themselves influential and thus associate with other officers, the representatives may be sharing the opinions of high-influence members rather than responding to their opinions as cues.

A choice between these alternative explanations could have been made if the representative's own opinion of the importance of his office had been available. Unfortunately the questionnaires were not identified by individuals for this measure.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As a step toward substantiating the belief that a measure of "effective" group opinion is better for some purposes than the average of the opinions of the total membership of a group, the hypothesis was tested that a particular member's estimate of his group's opinion will be more highly related to the opinions of the more influential members of the group than to those of the less influential members of the group. The reasoning behind this hypothesis was based on the assumption that influential members will more often express their opinions on a given matter and that their opinions will be taken to represent the group's.

The 25 individuals who represented their fraternities in an Inter-Fraternity Council (IFC) were interviewed and asked to judge the importance that their own group placed upon the office of IFC representative. Their responses were coded as either "important" or "unimportant" and the respective N's of the two sets of groups were 15 and 10.

The members of the 25 fraternities were given questionnaires and asked to give their own opinions as to the importance of the office. They were also asked to rate themselves according to the amount of influence they had in the fraternity. This latter measure was validated by its relationship to the holding of an office in the fraternity.

The representatives' estimates were more highly related to the opinions of the more influential members of their groups than to those of the less influential members, but this finding was due entirely to the differences between the high and low influence members in those groups judged by their representatives as regarding the office as unimportant. On the basis of this finding the original hypothesis must be restricted. However, the study does lend support to the usefulness of a concept of "effective" group opinion.

References:

1. Festinger, L., Informal social communication. Psychol. Rev., 1950, 57, 271-282.
2. Willerman, B., and Emerson, R. Perceived control and interdependence as related to member attitudes toward a coalition-type group. Technical Report No. 1 to O.N.R., 1954.

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